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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4841
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 004996

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAI DEMOCRAT PARTY ELECTION OUTLOOK, RELATIONS
WITH ARMY

REF: A. BANGKOK 4734 (WARY FRONTRUNNER)

[¶](#)B. BANGKOK 3625 (PALLOP PINMANEE)
[¶](#)C. BANGKOK 2304 (SUTHEP WARNS)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (C) A leading Democrat Party official projected that the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP) had a strong lead over all rivals as of mid-September. In a September 13 meeting, Democrat Party (DP) Deputy Leader Niphon Promphan told us the Democrats appeared likely to come in second; separately, another DP official declined to rule out his party winning a plurality. Although the Army and the Democrats have had strained relations in the recent past, our contacts said the Democrats were trying to improve ties to the Army and realized their performance in the election could benefit from some of the Army's actions. Niphon told us the Democrats privately promised that the next Army Commander could select military representatives for the positions of Defense and Interior Minister -- posts traditionally held by members of the security forces. Leading Democrats conveyed to Thaksin a belief that the Asset Examination Commission's freezing of Thaksin's assets was unfair. Niphon also identified the Democrat Party officials angling to become Foreign Minister in the next government. End Summary.

ELECTION PROJECTIONS

[¶](#)2. (C) We met on September 13 with Niphon Promphan, one of nine Deputy Leaders of the Democrat Party. Claiming that his estimates derived from a combination of reliable polling data and intuition based on the alignment of political figures, Niphon offered the following projections of the strength of political parties and groups:

- DEMOCRATS: Niphon said that, as of the time of our meeting, the Democrats had locked up only around 50 seats in the House of Representatives. However, he believed that by the year's end, the DP's efforts would result in a significantly

stronger showing (see below). Niphon sensed no threat to the Democrats' primacy in southern Thailand, claiming that party allegiance in the South was much stronger than in other regions, like the Northeast, where prominent legislators could ensure their election regardless of their party affiliation.

- PEOPLE'S POWER PARTY: Consistent with current conventional wisdom, Niphon said the pro-Thaksin PPP currently appeared in a position to win approximately 200 seats. He saw PPP trailing the Democrat Party in Bangkok by only a slight margin.

- CHART THAI: Niphon estimated the Chart Thai Party might win 50-60 seats in the next legislature. He noted Chart Thai leader Banharn Silapa-Archa was highly active in his efforts to recruit prominent candidates for election.

- FOR THE MOTHERLAND: The recent merger of several former Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party factions into a "For the Motherland" grouping (not aligned with Thaksin) appeared likely to win approximately 50 seats, Niphon said. (Note: Since the announcement of the Motherland group's formation on September 11, it appears to be tottering on the verge of disintegration. But we believe the figure of 50 seats reflects a credible "sum of the parts" estimate that does not rely on internal cohesion. End Note.)

- THAI UNITY/DEVELOPING NATION: The Thai Unity/Developing Nation group, also associated with former TRT figures currently unsympathetic toward Thaksin, should win at least 20 House seats, Niphon said. He confirmed rumors that Suwat Liptapanlop, one of the key leaders of this group, had explicitly agreed to join in a post-election coalition with

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the Democrat Party.

¶3. (C) Meeting separately with us on September 17, DP Deputy Secretary General Korn Chatikavanij predicted that the DP

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could sweep the South (56 seats); win anywhere between 15 and 30 of 36 seats in Bangkok (where voters' fickle character made predictions most difficult); and pull in up to 10 seats in the Northeast (significantly improving on its previous performance there). Without providing figures, he predicted strong showings in the North and Central regions. Korn also estimated the Democrats might win 30-40 of the 80 seats to be allocated to candidates on regional party lists. He said that if the elections were to be free and fair, and if TRT splinter groups were to lure many voters away from PPP, the DP could conceivably win a plurality.

MILITARY'S ROLE IN THE ELECTION

¶4. (C) Niphon told us that the military would play a key role in the coming election. If military figures were to signal that PPP would not be allowed to form the next government, this would discourage potential allies of Thaksin from campaigning aggressively, and it would encourage voters to choose Democrats or candidates who could join the Democrats in a coalition. Niphon said that, with time and a helpful message from the military, the Democrats could win 115-140 House seats. Separately, Korn told us he envisioned that the military would boost the Democrats' prospects in the coming election by intimidating many of the bagmen who would otherwise mobilize to buy votes on behalf of Thaksin and PPP.

¶5. (C) A former TRT legislator now with PPP told us recently that military figures were already pressing politicians not to plan to join PPP after the election. She told us that senior officers were claiming that alliance with PPP would represent disloyalty to the monarchy, and that those TRT figures who had been stripped of their political rights by

the Constitutional Tribunal might receive an amnesty if not aligned with PPP. (Ref A reported virtually the same claim from an ex-TRT contact now associated with the Motherland group.)

MILITARY'S ROLE IN THE NEXT CABINET

¶ 6. (C) Niphon flatly refuted rumors from weeks ago that the Democrats might back General Sonthi Boonyaratglin for Prime Minister, should he win election to the parliament. He told us, however, that the Democrats had already agreed that the military should be provided seats in the cabinet -- to help ensure a smooth restoration of democracy. Accordingly, the Democrats had promised that the positions of Defense Minister and Interior Minister would be reserved for the military, with one of the two possibly serving also as a Deputy Prime Minister. (Comment: The Democrats offering to place figures from the security forces in these positions would be consistent with Thai traditions; more often than not, military and/or police officers hold those positions. End Comment.)

¶ 7. (C) We remarked that conventional wisdom held that General Sonthi would be appointed as Defense Minister. (Weeks before, DP Secretary General Suthep Thaugsuban told us he would welcome Sonthi taking that position.) Niphon did not dispute the assertion. However, he said that the next Army Commander -- most likely Anupong Paojinda, in Niphon's view -- would convey the military's choice. Anupong's selections would likely reflect the preferences of Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, Niphon said.

¶ 8. (C) Noting the highly controversial reputation of retired General Pallop Pinmanee (ref B), we urged in our meeting with Niphon that the Democrats avoid any prospect of Pallop joining the cabinet. Niphon indicated Pallop had not been under consideration. He said he recognized it would be highly awkward for Pallop to hold a cabinet position. Pallop's sinister reputation and long track record of

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involvement with shady military operations would contrast markedly with 43-year-old Democrat Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva's relative lack of experience and clean reputation.

¶ 9. (C) We asked whether outspoken General Saprang Kallayanamitr appeared likely to join the next cabinet, should the Democrats form a government. Niphon said that Saprang currently appeared "broken-hearted" about losing out to Anupong in the competition to become Army Commander. If Saprang were to react maturely and remain in the good graces of the military establishment, he would be acceptable to the Democrats. However, if he appeared to rebel against the upcoming reshuffle of senior military officers, Saprang could lose his chance at a cabinet seat. The Democrats' most important criteria for the cabinet members in the Defense and Interior positions would be those figures enjoying good relations with the Army leadership.

¶ 10. (C) Korn reluctantly confirmed to us that the Democrats were prepared to offer cabinet seats to figures associated with the coup; he called this offer "a small price to pay for stability" and argued that General Sonthi, after retiring from the Army this fall, would be a civilian like any other. Korn noted that the military tended to view the Democrats with suspicion, in part because DP Party Leader Abhisit had no special ties to military officers and had shown little interest in military affairs. After the coup, Korn related, the military had hoped to see the Democrat Party dissolved, in order to re-shape the domestic political environment. (Ref C reported a similar view, relayed to us in April by DP Secretary General Suthep.) Korn said the DP had only

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survived the May Constitutional Tribunal proceedings because

the judges affirmed their independence and resisted pressure from the military.

¶11. (C) Ironically, the military currently felt more comfortable relying on former TRT figures who had broken with Thaksin -- rather than the Democrats -- to protect the military's interests in the political realm, according to Korn. He attributed this preference to the significant leverage the military had over such figures because of pending corruption investigations. Korn told us that the Democrats were seeking to build trust with the military through ongoing private discussions. Korn said the Democrats intended to recruit a number of retired military officers as legislative candidates in the coming election, and he noted that, although many DP officials were uneasy with the coup, they had deliberately refrained from opposing the interim administration's increases in the military's budget.

DEMOCRATS' POSITION ON THAKSIN

¶12. (C) Niphon said that both he and DP Secretary General Suthep had made it clear to Thaksin's close associates that they believed the Asset Examination Commission had acted rashly in freezing Thaksin's assets. Any assets that Thaksin had acquired legally should be immediately released, Niphon said, seemingly speaking with conviction. The freeze should only affect funds credibly viewed as derived from illegal activities.

POTENTIAL FOREIGN MINISTERS

¶13. (C) Niphon observed that figures within the Democrat Party were already angling for particular cabinet seats. He said that this jockeying reflected weak leadership on Abhisit's part, as a stronger Party Leader would put infighting to rest and make it clear that he held the final say on cabinet appointments. Currently, there were only two Democrat officials in the race for Foreign Minister, Niphon said: former Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra, and former Ambassador to the United States Kasit Piromya. Niphon assessed that Kasit was in a stronger position; although Sukhumbhand had more significant experience, he appeared "too sensitive" (i.e., easily upset by criticism). (Note: On several occasions, Secretary General Suthep has

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brought Kasit along to meetings with our Political Counselor.
End Note.)

COMMENT

¶14. (C) The political situation will continue to evolve, possibly in dramatic fashion, but we believe that our contacts have provided us with a useful snapshot of the current Democrat Party outlook. We note that Korn frequently speaks with foreign visitors and the press, and we believe his estimates for the coming election are overly optimistic and entail a measure of "spin." Niphon's more conservative estimates strike us as more credible. We find it particularly noteworthy that the Democrats admit they are making a deliberate effort to reach out to the military, and that they are prepared to welcome figures who led the 2006 coup d'etat into the next government.

BOYCE